Article

Muslimness on Demand: Critical Voices of Islam in Egypt

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Abstract: Academic research on Islam in Egypt often focuses on the entanglement of religion and politics, mostly analysed with regard to public spaces. This article seeks to nuance the focus on pious activism and the idea that Islam is dominating everyday life in Egypt by taking individuals' intimate non-religious perspectives into consideration. This research on individual pieties, on being religious and *doing* being religious, especially opened up the worlds of individuals who are different. Drawing on fieldwork with young Alexandrians this article considers the subtle voices that are currently becoming increasingly louder, which hint at tendencies away from mainstream Islam and express alternative options and different versions of belief. These silent, and often silenced, voices are heard only under exceptional circumstances, because they often coincide with criticism of present social and political conditions. Criticism that mixes religious, social, and political content is almost impossible to express publicly in Egypt. By focusing on these narratives, this article tries to understand the relationship between criticism of Islam and processes of individualization. In addition, it seeks to analyse these narratives in order to explore the dynamic character of the self in the realm of religiosities and non-religiosities.

Keywords: atheism; Egypt; criticism of Islam; religiosities; non-belief; non-religiosities; youth; Alexandria; processes of individualisation

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1. Introduction

“I don’t pray.
I don’t believe.
I am an atheist” (interview with author, February 2018).

Since the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, understandings of Islam have undergone efficacious changes. The ousting of President Hosni Mubarak was followed by the election of the Muslim Brotherhood’s candidate Mohammed Morsi, whose presidency has greatly affected the way Islam is perceived. Restrictions during Morsi’s rule—restrictions imposed in the name of religion—resulted in disappointment in the “Islamization project” of the regime (Haenni 2016; El Esrawi 2019). In the direct aftermath of the revolution, public debates over religiosity ensued and an unprecedented momentum of political and religious plurality translated in a wide array of movements and political fractions in the public sphere (Haenni 2016). This in turn was reflected in a momentum of re-positioning and questioning of political and religious authorities. For many individuals this also included reconsidering their (non-)religious identities. As Khaled Fahmy states in his reflection on the downfall of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013: “Egyptian society finds itself, confronting and raising [. . .] very, very deep questions [. . .]. [W]hat to do with Islam? What is the proper position of [. . .] Islam [. . .]” (Fahmy 2013)? While this holds true for larger political debate, in this article, I particularly examine how these questions have impacted the intimate experiences of young individuals. In addition, how did the momentum for change effectively set in motion a process of individualization, of which many Egyptians were in need, to form an opinion and a position? The revolution was perceived as a great

failure, in the sense of a collective momentum of delusion (Abaza 2020). What emotional mechanisms and strategies do youths employ to deal with these disappointments?

The change in power from Mohammed Morsi to President Abdel-Fatah al-Sisi is characterised by restrictions in an attempt to limit the impact of the Muslim Brotherhood. Moreover, public religious spaces such as mosques were regulated (Bano and Benadi 2018). Based on that, my initial, heuristic, question, was: Why do some Egyptians stop going to the mosque, and what does this apparent disenchantment with public religion symbolise? This question led to others: How does the daily life of those who do not follow mainstream Islam look? Moreover, what happens to their “selves” and how do they negotiate living in a Muslim majority society?

The turmoil of the revolution and its aftermath have been meticulously described and analysed by various scholars such as Saad (2012), Fahmy et al. (2019), Schielke (2015), Abaza (2012, 2014). Mona Abaza (2020) in particular highlighted how young individuals searching for identities are torn between agency and passivity since the revolution. She identifies insecurities, generational differences, and misunderstandings in terms of values and appreciation amid dystopian environments. This article relates to the existing scholarship and deals with searches for identity among young Egyptians but goes a step further by adding the dimension of individualisation and (non)religiosities to the analysis.

This research on individual pieties, being religious and *doing* being religious, not only provided me with insights into the worlds of individual believers, but especially opened up the worlds of individuals who are different. During the years 2016–2019, I lived in Alexandria to carry out ethnographic research within the larger ERC Project “Private Pieties. Mundane Islam and New Forms of Muslim Religiosity: Impact on Contemporary Social and Political Dynamics”, University of Göttingen. The following analysis and findings are based on the interviews I conducted as part of this ERC-Project. I examined the subtle voices that are currently becoming louder, which hint at tendencies away from mainstream Islam and express alternative options and different versions of belief. These silent, and often silenced, voices are only heard under exceptional circumstances, because they often coincide with the criticism of present social and political conditions. Criticism that mixes religious, social and political content is almost impossible to express publicly in Egypt (Schielke 2012). While “Muslimness” in all its facets and intensities is possible and accepted, “non-Muslimness” (including atheism and non-belief) exists, but cannot be articulated—certainly not in public and hardly in private. This often leads to “Muslimness on demand”, that is, my interlocutors would wrap themselves in Muslimness and act as Muslim in front of their families, colleagues or strangers. My interview partner, Saif, and I created the expression “Muslimness on demand” during one of our many discussions (10.12.2017). Saif describes himself to be a “homosexual atheist”, who needs to make use of the “Muslim” register in various situations, such as in front of his family, colleagues, neighbours and strangers. He is afraid of their opinion and that they would stigmatize him as “unworthy” and “shameful” if they knew he is not straight and not even a believing Muslim. Only close friends know his real identity (Franke 2020b). Although there is no visible public scene of atheists in Alexandria, the location of my research, those who do not believe in Islam do gather in private and in public, but without being recognizable as atheists. Like elsewhere, they also connect through other common interests, like age, favourite club, sexual orientation, interest in body modifications, or “doing drugs”. This has methodological relevance for my research, because I was able to get to know atheists through other acquaintances who do not consider themselves to be atheists (but Muslim, Agnostic, Baha’i).

This study also focuses on the relationship between processes of individualisation and criticism of Islam, exploring why some of my interview partners label themselves as non-believers, and what impact these different non-religious identities have on their selves. In my analyses, I demonstrate the processual and fluid character of (non-) religiosities. I thus aim to examine different interpretations and lifestyles of individuals who claim to no longer adhere to the perceived “Islamic mainstream norms”. These individuals

would be identified and identify themselves as Muslim and can range from simply *being* Muslim (passive believers) to *doing* being Muslim (active believers, as well as non-believers pretending to be Muslim). My focus group—those who label themselves as critical of Islam—ranges from those being silently critical but still believing, to those deliberately being different as active non-believers. The processes of individualisation that accompany the varying degrees of criticism are crucial in this respect. I will therefore first deal with the notion of criticism. Subsequently, I will take the reader into the field of my research to highlight some of the positions that I encountered. These positions will be analysed by means of theoretical concepts, such as mechanisms, camouflage, emotions, and trust, to explore the dynamic character of processes of individualisation in the realm of religiosities and non-religiosities. My main aim is to show the entanglement of (non-)religiosities and processes of individualisation. I will thus explore different processes of individualisation that demonstrate the multifaceted nature of the self.

My primary sources consist of qualitative individual interviews and group discussions, participative observation, and written sources in Arabic (Qur'an and Hadith, leaflets, "grey literature", and social media (for a detailed discussion of the role of the internet and social media in the context of religious transformations, see the contribution by Sebastian Elsässer in this Special Issue). I conducted 27 interviews with young Egyptians who consider themselves to be "different" in terms of religiosity and social expectations (for a quantitative analysis of the religio-scapes in Egypt, see the introduction by Karin van Nieuwkerk in this Special Issue. See also the opinion surveys from World Values Survey or Arab Barometer to specify dynamics among the larger Egyptian society: <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV7.jsp> (accessed on 15 January 2021) as well as <https://www.arabbarometer.org/countries/egypt/> (accessed on 15 January 2021). All of my interlocutors have been informed and gave their consent prior to the interviews about my academic intention, that I will use the interviews as sources for my work. All the names have been anonymised and personal details have been changed.

I spoke with both men and women aged between 18 and 35, some of whom participated in the 25 January revolution (Mehrez 2012). All are Alexandrians from middle class milieus with high school or university degrees. Fifteen are employed, with jobs ranging from personal trainer in a gym to a judge in the high court. Five are studying at Alexandria University, and seven are unemployed. I will draw in particular on the interviews (written conversations, and participant observations with those who consider themselves to be "different" in order to emphasize the flexibility and processual character of (non-)religiosities. This can include religiosity, non-religiosity and re-religiosity. By re-religiosity I mean the process of becoming religious (again), if someone has been less religious and did not pray for a while or even some years and then decides to resume praying for example. I chose interviews as a research method, despite being aware of the limitations and difficulties of interviews and language when researching sensitive subjects, because I was particularly interested in the emic expressions of my interlocutors. My interlocutors were open to interviews in specific places, such as my house, cafés with large open spaces to avoid proximity to potential bystanders/listeners. It would have been impossible for me to meet them in their private homes and "observe" anything deviant from Islam, since they usually hide their non-Muslimness in front of their families. Alexandria formed the centre for my research; having myself grown up in Alexandria, I was reliant upon, and grateful for, my social network there, especially since I took my three small children with me. In addition, Alexandria is an interesting city with diverse and heterogeneous (non-) religious milieus, such as Sunni, Coptic, Sufi, and Salafi communities.

Analysing religiosities and non-religiosities is a complex endeavour because it requires accounting for processes of transformation. I therefore analyse (non-) religiosities as fluid and multi-layered (non-) religio-scapes, in the sense of Arjun Appadurai's notion of social imaginaries (Appadurai 1996, p. 33). (Non-) religio-scapes are analysed as processes of religious belief or non-belief, which need to be looked at from varying perspectives. Different approaches from anthropology and Islamic studies, including gender, identity,

as well as emotions, are merged to acknowledge the complexity of studying (non) religious spaces.

2. Critical Approaches to Islam

Over the past years, academic research has increasingly dealt with topics such as religiosities and pieties. The study by Saba Mahmood (2005) on public piety of Muslim women in Cairo is a prominent example in this regard. Lara Deeb has similarly studied piety in public spaces in Beirut (Deeb 2006). This focus on public piety has been questioned by other scholars who highlight social groups and individual positions away from the public space. These studies deal with voices that challenge established norms and concepts in the realm of religion, religiosity and piety. The studies by Göle (2000), Haenni and Holtrop (2002), Soares (2005), Schielke (2006, 2009a), Debevec (2012) as well as Bayat (2013), Menoret (2014) and Kreil (2016) are ground-breaking examples. My own research continues this line of thought by looking at non-religiosities and non-pieties in Alexandria and thus listening to those voices who contest the established religious norms informed by the state or Islamist movements. These contesting voices do not want the public sphere to interfere in their intimate beliefs, or rather non-beliefs, and practices. Accordingly, this study adds to the existing literature and the ongoing debate regarding the subject of “anthropology of Islam” by taking into consideration Schielke’s criticism that “there is too much Islam in the anthropology of Islam” (Schielke 2010, p. 1). Although I mostly agree with Schielke’s analysis, my findings and my interlocutors demonstrate that Islam in general continues to be important to the younger generations. However, I try to nuance the debate by reflecting on those individuals who position themselves and their life worlds in relation to Islam, i.e., within or outside Islam, and the difficulties that emerge from this position. Islam can therefore not be ignored as an analytical category, but at the same time, we need to be aware that other aspects of everyday life are also important for the youths, such as prospects for the future, philosophy, family dynamics, and leisure activities. My study looks at the spectrum of Muslimness: not only the heterogeneity of the types of being Muslim (religious, pious etc.), but in particular of not being Muslim and being (actively) non-Muslim. This perspective acknowledges atheists as well as a wide range of passive and active non-religious individuals who try to negotiate and re-negotiate their selves in a society where Islam is not just a religion but framing life worlds through culture and tradition (Asad 2015).

I was often told during the many conversations I had in Alexandria, that “the” Islam does not exist but that “the” Islam has been polyphonic since its beginnings (Bauer 2011; al-‘Azam 1970, p. 87 and pp. 12–13). Criticism of Islam was part of its founding period during the time of the prophet Muhammad and has been debated throughout history with more or less intensity (‘Alāl 2018; Arkoun 2002; Al-Azmeh 1996; Said 2002, pp. 69–74; Arkoun 1994). Categories within these debates can vary from indifference (towards God, Islam, religious practices of the community), ignorance (of God), and scepticism or doubts (e.g., in the efficacy of prayer or hijab). However, such positions are usually excluded from the label “criticism of Islam” and are rejected as illegitimate by mainstream scholars. Moreover, most of my believing Muslim interview partners prefer to only subsume Muslim belief variations under the notions of “criticism of Islam” and not atheism or agnosticism (Al-Rawandī 2020). The fact that voicing criticism publicly or even in small private circles is difficult is also related to the fact that there really is hardly any publicly available contemporary criticism. However, in some cases in both my interviews and the debate, these variations are included and form a vital part of Islamic philosophy (al-‘Azam 1970; Asad 2009, pp. 20–63; Hanafi 1997, pp. 1025–42). Despite the fact that non-belief is part of Islam’s historical legacy, my interview partners felt that their deviant and different perspectives are something new. This timely aspect of “newness” in relation to one’s belief status is related to the developments that have been fostered by the 25 January 2011 revolution.

While the majority of the voices I collected are more or less in congruence with mainstream Islam, many of my interlocutors were critical of how “the” Islam is being interpreted and lived by others. Often, the criticism encompasses both the religion (Islam as *dīn*) and the lived religion (religiosity). Some of them would still consider themselves Muslim, while others would label themselves agnostics or atheists or refuse to label themselves. Atheism is not a new phenomenon in Muslim majority societies, however the spread of, and access to, the internet gives it more visibility and non-believers the possibility to research and connect with other like-minded persons worldwide. This might create the impression that atheism is on the rise, but it remains to be awaited if this is permanent or a temporary trend (besides the fact that a certain number of non-believers always exists in societies). The youths often do not want to be labelled or label themselves as anything. They prefer to leave the “identity-card” blank in order to have all options still available, and to switch between identities more easily without needing to explain who and what they are. I understand criticism here in its original sense as “differentiation” and not necessarily as opposition: differentiation between various forms of how to be a (“good”) Muslim and differentiation between Islam and other forms of belief or non-belief (von Bormann and Tonelli 1976, pp. 1249–67). “Scepticism” would also be applicable here, however, I prefer the term “differentiation” to highlight its unbiased meaning. Among my interlocutors, there is a wide variety of positions from occasional doubt to convinced atheism (Janson 2016). Non-belief is just one of the many ways to positioning oneself.

The term that I encountered most frequently in Alexandria when talking about religiosities was *īmān*, and its corresponding *mu’min*, which are generally translated as “belief” and “believing” (McGuire 2008; Asad (2011) refers in footnote 20 also to chapter 6 of Smith (1998) for an etymological account of the terms). Other recurrent terms that emerged in the interviews on non-religiosities include “atheist”, agnostics, apostates, and the notion of the non-religious. “Atheists”—*mulaḥad*, *mulḥid*, *ilḥād*, categorise themselves as not believing in God. “Agnostics”—*lā-’adrīyūn*, “not knowing”, or consider it impossible for humans to know whether God exists or not. “Apostates”—*murtadd*, *ridda* (Wehr 2003, p. 387), renounce a belief, while the notion of the “non-religious” *lā-mutadayyin* refers to those who believe but do not practice, sometimes also labelled as “indifferent” or “ignorant”, whereas, *lā-dīnī*, *ghair-mu’min*, *ghair-dīnī*—“without religion” or “non-believer”—are summarising terms that can encompass atheists, agnostics and apostates (Wehr 2003, p. 999). I also use the notion non-conformists, which encompasses those who consider themselves to be religiously deviant or different (belief and non-belief variations) (Kleine 2015, pp. 3–34).

3. From the Field: Intimate Perspectives

I encountered various forms of non-religiosities in Alexandria, and would like to introduce two individuals and their critical perspectives to Islam. During an interview with Khaled in February 2018, he asked me if I was interested in atheists—a topic that I did not bring up myself, since the Egyptian state outlaws atheism, which makes talking about the subject both in public and in private a dangerous endeavour (HRW—Human Rights Watch 2015). I answered a bit hesitantly: “Sure, why not—do you know any?” Khaled affirmed saying “You have to meet Mo’men, he is an atheist, he doesn’t believe in Islam, but his name is very Muslim—funny, *ṣaḥī?*” and organised a meeting with him. My hesitancy stemmed from the fact that studying religiosities was risky enough and although my pre-formulated questions—prior to the field trip—included non-religiosities, I did not expect to be able to meet unashamedly self-defined atheists. For me, the aspect of non-religiosities was more about being a non-practicing Muslim and not necessarily about rejecting religion altogether.

Khaled himself is a 34-year-old Egyptian from Alexandria, trained in politics and economics. He lives from one day to another on a considerable inheritance from his deceased parents. Unmarried without children, he shares a flat with his older brother whom Khaled describes as “quite religious and not approving of my lifestyle”. Khaled’s lifestyle is characterised by voluntary joblessness, sleeping in, and spending nights out

in Alexandria's bars, hanging out with friends and drinking alcohol and taking various kinds of drugs. His uncle is a well-known Sheikh in Alexandria, the reason behind the initial suggestion for an introduction to Khaled. I usually met Khaled in public cafés in downtown Alexandria, and since he was flexible regarding time, we most often met during the day. The hours we spent together were not only interesting in terms of his position towards Islam, but also because of his understandings of Egyptian economics, politics, culture and society, all of which "go into the aspect of religion. Here in Egypt nothing can be separated from Islam and everything is incorporated in Islam. So, if you want to know anything about the people and religion, you need to know this [entanglement]." Khaled's perception of religion and "who he is" is crucial. "Who one is" was a recurrent theme during many of my interviews. It is about one's identity, which is also defined within the realm of Islam, and my interviewees mostly considered being Muslim to be a part or the part of one's identity. This also applies in one way or another to those who no longer consider themselves to be Muslim. Khaled says of himself that he is very critical about Islam and labels himself "Muslim in a way, also agnostic; yes I am a Muslim agnostic". For him, on a practical level in everyday life, this means that he does not pray, that he is not sure about his belief, and that he doubts it. However, during Ramadan he fasts—but on his own terms which can mean that he fasts consecutively for a few days, that he fasts only during the week and not on weekends, that he stops smoking during the day and drinks (alcohol) only on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays. His broad and personalised interpretation of the requirements and necessities of Islam is rather flexible, which he adjusts to his mood and schedule.

This flexibility that Khaled expressed to be his "religious lifestyle" is rather different to Mo'men's perception. Mo'men, an Alexandrian in his early 20s, is very strict when it comes to the subject of religion: "I don't pray. I don't believe. I am an atheist" (interview with author, February 2018). He started reading philosophers such as Nietzsche and Kant when he was still a teenager. Both prompted him to think about his own religion:

"But I was still doing religious things like praying and fasting with my family. It is not easy to be different when everyone around you expects you to be like them without doubting or questioning what and why you are doing what you are doing. Then I had to join the military. This was a disaster. Because of the military itself and because of religion. I was stationed in the Red Sea area where they have gold mines. All the other soldiers and officers are praying and fasting and stuff. I usually went smoking cigarettes when they prayed. But one day the officer asked me why I don't pray with them—so I decided to pray with them, because I didn't want any questions. After a while I stopped praying again and nobody asked any more questions. I hated these prayer times. I also hate the military."

Mo'men's ability to camouflage his intimate position and to act as a praying Muslim alongside his comrades is indicative of the process of social wrapping in the sense of "Muslimness on demand". This has nothing to do with a light version of Islam, with choosing what fits for one's own benefit from the religious register that one's religion offers—it is about the ability to adapt to what one perceives as socially expected behaviour, to avoid conflict, to camouflage one's inner self. Mo'men underwent a metamorphosis of his religious identity, from Muslim to Atheist. This metamorphosis is not a streamlined process, but a curvy one, with detours and twists and turns (Alhourani 2008, pp. 185–203; Hendry 1993).

Mo'men is now working as an engineer for a construction company. The things he witnesses from so called "pious people" (*mu'minūn*), for example theft of work material, is proof for him that they are all just "pretenders" (*mutazāhirūn*). He no longer wants to be part of this "superficial game". For him, the revolution of 2011 changed a lot:

"Not only that people were finally talking about anything really, but also that we teenagers started using the internet frequently. This made it easy for me to search

for information on anything really. I did not read Nietzsche in a book, I read him on the internet and what I found was exactly what I was feeling. First, there was the doubt that things around me, things like Islam, are not true. That we are just marionettes to some God, some leader. But this is not enough for me. I started thinking and reading more and I found that there is lots of material on atheism. And that this is me. I am an atheist [*anā mulḥid*].”

Intrigued by his strong position, I asked him about his perception of the afterlife, since this is a dominant theme in the everyday life of most Muslims. He told me that he does not believe in an afterlife and that he also does not believe in paradise: “We have this world to live in and to do our best to get along with each other but that’s about it. When we die, we die. There will not be anything called paradise or re-birth. This is what I *think*, since I am a non-believer I do not *believe* in things, I can only think or assume.” For Mo’men, his realisation of no longer being a Muslim caused a metamorphosis in the sense that he rejects anything to do with Islam and that he re-defined himself as atheist (King 1996, pp. 343–51). He even stopped saying common phrases like *‘in šā’a-llāh*, *al-ḥamdu-lillāh*, *as-salāmu ‘alaykum*—religiously connoted sayings, which are part of the everyday language of most Egyptians. Even those who do not believe or doubt their belief would still say them out of habit or intentionally, so that they do not reveal their otherness, their difference, their non-belief (intentional boundary). Not so for Mo’men. For him, it is a sign of weakness or laziness if someone still uses these sayings, even though they no longer believe in God. While Mo’men said that he would not tell anyone he is an atheist, he was walking on a dangerous path by not using religious phrases in social situations requiring them, such as when facing sickness or death, or as an answer to a religious phrase, such as *as-salāmu ‘alaykum*: *wa ‘alaykum as-salām* or *mabrūk*: *allāh yubārek fik/ī*. Saying *ahlan wa sahlan* to the former or replying *shukran* to the latter is not the expected answer for the counterpart. This can not only be perceived as rude and unfriendly but can also signify non-religious behaviour that creates doubt about one’s Muslimness in the mind of the others (Singh 2012).

4. Turning Points: Processes of Individualisation and Interpretations of the Intimate Self

The examples of Khaled and Mo’men are indicative of the struggles for religious and social freedom and the corresponding processes of individualisation in contemporary Egypt (Franke 2020a; Hall 1990). While the revolution has its share of triggering and empowering these processes, initial dynamics of individualisation happened prior to the uprising in various areas, such as marriage, higher education or dress codes. Khaled and Mo’men take these processes to another level by positioning themselves in opposition to mainstream Islam in different ways.

Khaled, on the one hand, is still embedded in Muslim thinking and Islamic norms. He reinterprets existing religious knowledge for his own benefit to serve his needs in everyday life. His position is not so clear and not necessarily in opposition to Islam per se but in opposition to how Islam is being lived around him. Accordingly, his criticism of Islam is a criticism of the way Islam is interpreted and practiced in society (McGuire 2008). On the other hand, there is Mo’men, an unapologetic atheist. He is very determined in his rejection of Islam and anything related to it. His criticism spans Islam as *dīn* and overall society, most of the members of which he considers to be “hypocrites”, *munāfiqūn* (Schielke 2012). Being aware of his endangered position, he tries not to stand out in public, while at the same time, no longer pretending to be Muslim (HRW—Human Rights Watch 2015). His experiences during military service were a lesson not to go against his own conviction just to please others. Mo’men is now very self-confident about his atheism and does not hide it, yet he also does not rub it in the faces of others, and usually wraps himself in silence.

Both Khaled and Mo’men decided at some point in their lives to be different (Alhourani 2008). This decision took time to develop—in the case of Mo’men, it took five years of contemplation and another three years to be sure of his choice and to

live an atheism-conforming life. His surroundings were not very conducive for this metamorphosis, coming as he did from a lower middle-class milieu of a “traditional family that is very religious”. The “new” Mo’men needed to move out of his family house and find a flat. Given his low salary, this meant that he had to rent a room in a shared flat—something that was not very common in Alexandria prior to the revolution. It is now more common, at least among the younger generations, although it is still not considered “normal”. For Khaled, things look differently. His parents passed away when he was at university, and although he lives with his religious brother, he says he is freer to do as he wants than others whose parents are still alive. In his everyday life, nobody controls or questions him. His brother does not ask any questions and this freedom allows Khaled to sleep in, party, and fast or not.

At some point in their lives, both Khaled and Mo’men began to critically think about the religion they were born into. This turning point is individual. Throughout my research among young Alexandrians who consider themselves to be different or non-believers, most reported that this turning point came during their teenage years, around the years of the 2011 revolution (Roudi-Fahimi et al. 2011). The turning point has often been triggered by curiosity for other religions or philosophical thinking, out of anger at the perceived religious hypocrisy of families and friends, or out of boredom. This resulted in surfing the internet out of curiosity, or out of necessity—especially in the case of my homosexual interlocutors. The reasons are diverse and not always explicitly connected to a specific event or incident. However, it can be said that the interlocutors’ distance from Islam mostly occurred at the conscious level in combination with various emotions.

Most initially appear to have had a feeling of being uncomfortable in their religious practices and around those who consider themselves religious. The feeling of doubt and uncertainty opened the space of wanting to know more—beyond the already known. With the newly acquired knowledge came feelings of disenchantment towards Islam and subsequently feelings of detachment of their “home religion” (Benjamin 2014). The notion of disenchantment is important here in the sense of emotional distancing. This distancing occurs in the realm of intimacy and the intimate self. Regarding the notion of intimacy, I would like to emphasize, that while many scholars understand and define intimacy as something related to desires, sometimes correlated with physical relationships, I understand intimacy to first be related to the self, second to space and third to other people, (Hammad 2016; Kreil 2016, pp. 166–80; Jyrkiäinen 2019). It paved the way to consciously think and act according to, what they perceive to be, the expected norms of atheism, agnosticism and all the variations therein (Harvey 2016). By norms I mean, what my interview partners perceived and explained to be the habitus of being an atheist or agnostic, such as stating “I don’t believe, thus I am an atheist, therefore I do not pray and I do not say religious sayings”. While some of my interview partners would feel comfortable in their new status of non-believer, others would try several options, even other religions (such as Baha’i or Buddhism), just to return to Islam in a new or different manner, or to come to the conclusion that agnosticism best describes their state of contemplation. This shows that the shifting religio-scapes and non-religio-scapes in Alexandria are not static, but in flux. It is a constant process of thinking and re-thinking, navigating, negotiating and re-negotiating one’s position towards and within Islam.

This struggle for one’s (non) religious positioning and identity is consequently also a struggle for individualisation (Fuchs and Rüpke 2015, pp. 323–29; Fuchs 2015; Alhourani 2008, pp. 185–203; Hall 1990, pp. 222–37). The processes of individualisation that are currently occurring in Egyptian society are one of the major findings of my field study (Franke 2020a; 2020b, pp. 22–29; 2021). Most of my interlocutors stressed their “very own” perspective on religion: on how to be religious or not to be religious, how to believe or to not believe, how to practice or not to practice, what to wear or what not to wear. They particularly reflect on the crucial question of the “why”—which shall be confined to the intimate space of the self (Foucault 1988). I follow Martin Fuchs in that my “approach [. . .] implies that one has to be open to the inclusion of additional, partially different experiences

and narratives of individualisation [. . .], it means focusing, above all, on the *experiences, doings and perspectives* of [individuals] [. . .]” (Fuchs 2015, p. 333; emphases are mine). According to Fuchs, the lens to research religious developments should be the concept of individualisation, that is, how religion is “lived, articulated and re-instituted [. . .] [this includes how] actors see themselves and their practices” (Fuchs 2015, p. 333). Fuchs focuses in his analysis on relationships of the individual with others, which are interactive and constitutive of social imagination. While I agree with his observation that notions of the self should be centre stage in analysing processes of individual religiosities, I differ from his position that considers religious individualisation as opposed to processes of individualism (Fuchs 2015). The example of Mo’men shows that (non-)religious individualisation can also be entangled with processes of individualism. In my study, I observed a number of ways and styles of people expressing their individualisation. In the examples of Khaled and Mo’men, the mechanisms and strategies encompassing these processes of individualisation take place in terms of self-determination and in the sense of setting and defining one’s physical and emotional boundaries. The case of Khaled shows that these mechanisms and strategies can be embedded within Islamic social norms and structures, namely, to be in-between Islam. This means that my interview partners attempt to remain part of mainstream Muslim society, to adjust their perspective to the perceived norms, to hide, remain silent or camouflage their true self and not to openly challenge religious and social boundaries.

In other cases, such as in the example of Mo’men, it is about moving beyond Islam. Beyond Islam here signifies the aim of my research participants to experiment and live with what is possible outside Islamic norms and societal expectations (this is in contradiction to the arguments and findings of Binzel and Carvalho (2017, p. 2573) who state that “a (one-time) decline in social mobility can cause a widespread and long-lasting religious revival led by the educated middle class”). They try to live their intimate selves, by disregarding, opposing or contesting the expectations of family and friends. For these persons, the struggle to be seen as independent individuals is quite challenging. They consistently stated that a lot of energy was required to confront their loved ones with opinions and convictions that differ completely from the principles they were raised with and lived with until the moment of change. This educational biography applies to both parties, that is, my non-conformist interlocutors and their “loved ones”. In many cases, my interviewees and their families share the same—or a similar—upbringing with comparable norms and ideals. Thus, there is a common ground of knowledge regarding Islamic principles and how Islam should be practiced in everyday life.

However, my non-conformist interlocutors deliberately took a different path. This change requires demarcations, and every person I spoke with had, and continues to have to define for themselves what these boundaries are, how they protect them and how they circumvent others’ boundaries. Those who adhere to mainstream Islam also have boundaries of what is and what is not acceptable for them. While most interview partners, both believers and non-believers, stated that they are open and do not judge anyone because in Islam, this is up to God or because they want to give the freedom they ask for themselves to others (in the cases of non-believers), reality can look differently. For example, some of the believers with whom I spoke said that they are relaxed regarding prayer and veiling for their children. Yet, when I spoke with these children, they mentioned that their parents are not as relaxed as they claimed and in fact forced the children to pray or to veil.

5. Processual Dynamics: Anger as Transformative Power

These different realities and corresponding generational discrepancies triggered changes that my interlocutors said occurred at the same tumultuous time as the revolution. Both eased the way for changes in thinking (Sowers and Toensing 2012). These reflections included contemplation about oneself, about God and religion, about one’s

family and friends, society, health, work and politics (Swedenborg 2012, pp. 285–94). Mo'men concurred with Khaled's perspective:

"With the revolution we could finally start thinking freely about the failures around us and in ourselves. First in terms of politics. We saw Mubarak fall—Mubarak the great leader of Egypt, basically our society's father. Second in terms of family dynamics. This enabled us to see our real fathers fall—we demonstrated and gathered against their wish. And finally, with regard to religion. We started doubting God and we saw God falling and failing. He couldn't protect us anymore. So who is he then? Not powerful enough? Maybe he doesn't exist. These thoughts set the balls rolling" (interview with author, February 2018).

This perspective was reinforced by the psychologists with whom I also met several times (Franke 2020a). They too, maintained that patriarchal structures within Egyptian families are no longer strong and are shaky. Children are challenging these structures by no longer blindly obeying their parents. The parents cannot resort to God's anger as a last resort of failed educational sanctions if the children do not believe in God and God's power any longer. Questioning God's power in line with questioning the power of one's father (parents) and the power of the political leader—from a psychological perspective, all three are considered to be the major pillars of Egyptian society—meant that power is shifting in society (El-Sharnouby 2017, pp. 84–95; Yordanova 2017, pp. 492–98). The nuclear and extended family can be understood as resembling the larger Egyptian society, as the psychologist Dr. Shadi put it (interview with author, June 2018). The youth is questioning "old" power relations and demanding "new" dynamics in which their voices, their visions, their perspectives are respected, heard and ideally established. Dr. Shadi views the anger that the youth is projecting at these three pillars as vital in the coming years. He already sees transformations happening in these areas: "The anger that the youth feel, and which I can see in my sessions, is an underrated emotion that often has negative connotations. Anger is a very powerful emotion and anger can bring about something new; it is a creative emotion and should not necessarily be repressed" (Tavris 1989; Baruch et al. 2008; Nisar and Rashid 2016, pp. 1–16).

During my research stays in Alexandria, I could see that the anger of the youth is entangled with disappointment and expectation, frustration and hope (Swedenborg 2012, pp. 285–94; Schielke 2009a, pp. 158–85; Misztal 2016, pp. 100–19). These emotions are felt not only towards the political leader, family structures and God, but were accompanied by the feeling of powerlessness regarding the impossibility of creating one's own future. This was particularly salient in terms of job prospects and accessing an apartment. In Egypt, this correlates with starting one's own family, as a regular income is needed to buy or rent an apartment which is the basis for engagement, marriage, and procreating. The absence of these results in frustration in young men and women at the economic situation in Egypt and political mismanagement (Swedenborg 2012, pp. 285–94; Schielke 2009a, pp. 158–85). If the way of life and the lack of choice depends on aspects that are difficult or impossible to change for the majority of the youth, then the level of frustration leads to anger and ultimately to "emotional blunting" (Berenbaum et al. 1987, pp. 57–67; Tasman and Mohr 2011). According to another of my interviewees Asmaa, the deteriorating post-revolution situation meant for her that the voices of the youth are not being heard:

"We were demonstrating every day, we had hopes and expectations. We were happy, euphoric and optimistic. We knew, now, now change is possible. Egypt will flourish. Our future will be glorious. This was what we felt. Everything was possible. Everything that is good will finally come to us. And then? Now? Nothing. Nothing of all that. We are stuck. Life sucks more than before the revolution. We cannot do anything. We are imprisoned. Yes, a few things changed. Many of us live in shared apartments now and not with their parents anymore. We have changing relationships and sexual contact. Many of us do not want to get married or have children. We do not believe in God or Islam any

longer. It is a version of freedom. But in the end, what is this freedom useful for? Nothing! Our situation is actually worse: we are not in the old structures of tradition and culture anymore, we want to be modern and open minded, but our chances are limited, actually zero. We see and access the world through social media and we still cannot be part of it. So, we create our own world, spaces of refuge. We experiment in our leisure time with non-religion. And with drugs, music and sex, with fashion and tattoos. What we want is another revolution. A revolution that has an outcome. Maybe even a change of society that is not conservative anymore. We want to breathe within our society. Now, it is all suffocating, our family, politics, society, work. Even traffic. It's all too much. There is no space. No space for action or interaction and no space to move. Not even to think. And this is dangerous. I see this and I tell you this. But my friends—they drown everything in alcohol, in drugs. They close their eyes. I also want to close my eyes, but I am a girl, maybe it's different for me. I still feel responsible. The others don't feel this. We go out every day after work, we gather at someone's place or we go to the bars. We try not to be alone to always have friends around us. Sometimes we discuss things. Many times, we just sit, talk bullshit, drink, smoke, listen to music, dance. Sometimes we cook together. It's dangerous for us, because neighbours or the *bawwāb* can call the police and this would get us into trouble. But we usually pay him or give him a beer. In Ramadan it is even more dangerous. But we still do it. I think we don't have anything to lose" (interview with author, March 2018).

According to Asmaa, the account of her perception of life is representative of her friends' situations. She uses the pronoun "we" while she talks about her life to strengthen her position and to make her account less personal. Asmaa is 29 years old. She comes from a middle-class milieu family with "strict, conservative parents, who have enough money to pay for a good education". Her father, working as an engineer, "forced" her to put on the veil at the age of 15. Her mother works part-time in a bank and is also veiled. During university and the heyday of the revolution, she decided to set new boundaries, move out of her parents' house—against their wishes—and take off the veil—also against their wishes. This was at the age of 20. The breakup with her parents was necessary in her eyes because they excessively limited her sense of freedom and because she could no longer take the constant fighting between her parents and between her parents and her siblings. Moreover, the biggest problem for Asmaa was the impossibility to speak about herself with her family. Neither her parents nor her siblings seemed to be interested in her thoughts and feelings. There was no space in her home to speak about her intimate self with them. Her inability to discuss with her parents her wish to take off the veil, or to move out, or to discuss her frustrations or her friends bothered her very much. She felt as if she was a different person in her family—wrapped in invisibility and silence.

This dual life is something I came across often during my research in Alexandria. Almost everyone I met who considers themselves to be different in one way or another, is trying to cover up and hide this otherness in order to pretend to be "normal", "like everyone else", or "as expected by society". These "standards" that are set by society and perceived to be guidelines for everyone are by no means written norms. They are negotiated rules enforced by parents and grandparents on the younger generations. The expectation is that they will be obeyed and any misbehaviour will be ultimately punished by God, who is the last resort or employed as last resort (El Feki 2014; El Feki et al. 2017). Most of my interview partners said that it is difficult and complicated for them to act in opposition to these perceived norms: not to pray and not to obey or believe in God, not to have sexual relations before marriage, not to be straight, not to live alone, and not to wear the hijab for women (if required by the family or spouse).

The emotional state of my interlocutors who consider the revolution to be a turning point in their lives was striking. Not only because the majority of these young people highlighted the emotions, but also because the revolution triggered and empowered them

to actively change something in their lives that made them unhappy—be it moving out of the family home, taking off the veil, to stop *doing* being religious and to stop being religious, or by dating, drinking alcohol, getting a tattoo, or changing career. The turning point also meant a shift in power structures (Galán 2012, pp. 17–30). They made use of their agency to change things and to act in non-conformity to established norms that apply to their family members or to the larger society. As Susana Galán puts it: “The 2011 Egyptian revolution can be explained in many different ways, but even the most systematic account of events will fail to convey the emotional intensities of that time and its affective impact on its participants: the dreams and aspirations, the hope, the pain, the confusion and the disappointment” (Galán 2012, p. 17).

These processual dynamics which encompass the religious and the non-religious are focussing on patriarchal structures that are now being questioned and contested. The father-figure of the political leader, the family father, and ultimately God as universal father of the *umma*, are not accepted or taken for granted any longer (Yordanova 2017, pp. 492–98). Their position and power over the individual is subject to individual interpretation and criticism, even rejection. The fact that the social environment by which the non-believer is surrounded is perceived to be inflexible when it comes to the needs of the non-believer, demonstrates that strategies have to be acquired by each individual in order to remain part of the social community without having to fear exclusion (Schneiders 2010, p. 13). These strategies can, for example, be camouflage, disguise, and pretence. They can span the realms of discourse, embodiment and practice (Emerson and Holquist 1986, pp. 121–22; Anderson 2006; Eliade 1959). Although it is not the ideal form of living, they still consider these strategies to be necessary for them “to live in peace” with others and not to be bothered. They hide their intimate selves and only reveal them to an explicitly chosen audience.

6. Mechanisms of Metamorphosis: Camouflage and Emotions

Criticism of Islam alongside atheism and agnosticism is highly sensitive in Egypt, which constitutes a difficult surrounding for anything deviant from mainstream Islam. My protagonists apply several techniques in the realm of strategic hiding mechanisms. These techniques are necessary to protect oneself from social and political punishment, and to avoid “otherness”. At the same time, these mechanisms also need to be flexible enough for individuals to maintain their integrity (Alhourani 2008). Strategic mechanisms in general are meant here in the sense of techniques of the self, to camouflage their real identities, while at the same time not losing their intimate positions (Foucault 1988).

In line with Jeannette Marie Mageo, I argue that hiding and camouflaging oneself is a great deal about controlling, hiding and camouflaging one’s emotions and beliefs (Mageo 1998, p. 91). For my non-conformist interlocutors, it is important to separate their own ideological perspectives from their emotional selves. Camouflaging their emotions and feigning different opinions should not affect their emotions. The fact that they are non-conformist in terms of their non-religiosity does not mean that they have to act in a visible, non-conformist manner. Particularly in Alexandria’s public spaces, it is important to practice religious conformism and to reproduce dominant social practices. This is in line with Pierre Bourdieu’s habitus approach on power relations and social structures that are being reproduced (Bourdieu 1977). Or, as Richard Jenkins puts it: “Structures produce the habitus, which generates **practice**, which **reproduces** the structures [. . .] [emphases are mine]” (Jenkins 1982, p. 273).

In addition, Joy Hendry offers an interesting approach to the subject of presentation, namely the culture of wrapping. This includes the material culture of wrapping presents, language as wrapping, the wrapping of the body and space, as well as social wrapping—in the sense of people wrapping people (Hendry 1993). I find her approach useful, since my interview partners who re-defined themselves as no longer Muslims wrap themselves in Muslimness in order to please others, which is indicative of Hendry’s social wrapping. Moreover, for my interlocutors, social wrapping means using wrapping techniques such

as hiding, silence and camouflage to wrap their belief status. This includes wrapping themselves as Muslim in front of a certain audience—those who would not accept or rather those who are perceived as not accepting one's new belief status—not talking about religion and one's own convictions at all and finding excuses for not praying collectively at home or at a mosque. In the latter case, one pretends to have already prayed or will pray later or claims to have a business meeting at prayer times (Alhourani 2008). The same is true for fasting in Ramadan, by eating and drinking without others as witness.

The social wrapping is strategically employed for several reasons. Some of my interview partners stated that they do not want to lie to their loved ones, because they think that this is morally wrong. Others would say that they do not want to involve anyone in their intimate affairs of religious conviction because they are shy and do not want to share personal topics with anyone. Others mentioned that they fear public intervention if they inform people about this delicate topic of non-belief and atheism. So, for their own protection and also to protect others from becoming involved in a potential legal case, they keep this information to themselves and wrap themselves in silence. Some are afraid of the reaction of their peers, such as being rejected, or they do not want to be forced to debate religion and may even be forced to change their perspective.

By means of social wrapping, doubt should not surface, since it is not only an emotion among the critics of Islam, but also an emotion among counterparts that can threaten the lives and safety of the non-conformists. Thus, the internal doubt of the individual should not spread to others—others should feel confident in the individual's Muslim belief status. I emphasize this, because it is of utmost importance to my protagonists that their ambiguity when it comes to the subject of criticism of Islam remains within their intimate selves. I use the term ambiguity here in reference to Thomas Bauer, who highlights the presence of ambiguity among pre-modern Muslim societies (Bauer 2011). He analyses the "Ambiguitätstoleranz" of Islam from the 9th to the 16th centuries (Bauer 2011, pp. 13–14). Bauer says that these centuries were known for their tolerance regarding ambiguity within Islam. Referring to his analysis, and also taking into account Karin van Nieuwkerk's approach to conversion and deconversion of Islam, which similarly mentions ambiguity and doubt in this respect, I use the term ambiguity with a different connotation, namely in the sense of not being sure of how to be oneself among mainstream society and also of how to position oneself in-between or beyond mainstream Islam (van Nieuwkerk 2018). Moreover, my focus is not on historical processes, but on the intimate level of the self. By no means should this ambiguity be passed on to someone else, neither as confirmed information nor as assumed fact in order to prevent rumours from spreading among the community. The same is true in those cases where ambiguity is absent from the beginning or has been transformed into certainty during the process of changing one's belief status.

Ambiguity as well as certainty in non-conformism need to be protected and shielded from curious enquiries, views or investigations (Kleine 2015, pp. 3–34). Both should be treated and kept secret. As is the nature of secrets, they need to be kept unique and unshared, otherwise they lose their status of exclusivity and can pose trouble or danger for both the confessor and the listener. By treating one's intimate non-religiosity as an exclusive secret, the belief status becomes a valuable mind-set that some of my interview partners even considered to be a treasure. Thus, it was possible for them to separate it from their own body, practice and public figure, and self-representation. This treasure, the secret, was detached from their identity in such cases where they considered it necessary to hide their non-religiosity. Communal prayer, fasting, repeating religious phrases, wearing the hijab—these can be measurements to camouflage their belief status in front of others, both in the private and in the public spaces. During my time in the field, I have not met anyone who informed their entire family of their non-belief. Some might have shared their secret with siblings, but rarely. None have spoken with their parents about their non-believer status, and their extended families also remain unaware.

Since the social environment of the person who maintains a non-conformist perspective regarding religion is not receptive and welcoming of deviant viewpoints, the position

of the non-believer is rather fragile. Power might be exerted on them by peers or state measures. Thus, many non-believers apply social wrapping and the technique of wrapping themselves in silence in order to continue to be part of the social setting in which they are embedded.

7. The Entanglement of (Non-)Belief and Trust

Trust was often mentioned simultaneously with the idea of “secret” by my interview partners, and so researching non-conformism in the emotional context of doubt and ambiguities also meant looking at trust as a concept (Weber 1988, pp. 471–72). Trust is a complex interpretive concept with multidimensional facets (Luhmann 1989, pp. 1, 7–8, 16 and 23). In the discipline of philosophy, there is a long ongoing debate on the notion of trust with various scholars discussing this complex concept. Among them are Simmel, Jencks, Luhmann, Giddens, Durkheim, Parsens, Elias, and others. All of these scholars focus on different aspects of the concept, with partly varying, even disagreeing stances. Simmel 1978, p. 179; Jencks 1979, p. 63; Luhmann 1979, pp. 26, 66–69; Parsons 1970; Elias 2000, p. 482; Giddens 1990, pp. 99, 121; Jalava 2003, p. 175).

Accordingly, I will focus on the entanglement of belief and trust, since this is at the core of my interlocutors’ positions. Blending belief and trust means that others expect the individual to act according to their interpretation of Islamic norms. The concept of trust has many facets, the first being trust in me as an international researcher. The second usually was trust in oneself, as in being true to the self, as well as being authentic in thought, deed and word. A third aspect is trust that one’s new and different belief is the truth. Finally, my interlocutors claimed that trust in others played a major role in the sense that they could only open up to others if they felt assured to trust their integrity.

For my interlocutors, social life in the sense of everyday life in combination with religiosity—or non-religiosity—is an arena of struggle. This struggle can be internal as well as external, with the latter characterised mostly by power struggles. As Jencks argues: “One of the classic puzzles—perhaps the classic puzzle—of social theory is how society induces us to behave in ways that serve not our own interests, but the common interest of society” (Jencks 1979, p. 63) [emphasis is mine]. In this sense, knowledge transaction, as in information transaction, would fail without trust. According to Giddens, the self must be a reflective one, since modernity has influenced and led to alterations regarding the intimacy of social relationships. Interpersonal relations are not self-evident, but rather mutual social projects that require “work”, and the trust between the individuals needs to be won (Giddens 1990, p. 121). Contrary to Giddens, I argue in the case of my study that trust in individuals, in each other, and in their Muslimness does not need to be won in Alexandrian society. They acquire general trust by society, since born Muslims are trusted to stay Muslims throughout their lives. The important aspect is that trust needs to be kept and not lost. I relate here to Simmel who talks about the belief in someone: “[w]ithout the general trust that people have in each other, society itself would disintegrate, for very few relationships are based entirely upon what is known with certainty about another person, and very few relationships would endure if trust were not as strong as or stronger than rational proof or personal observation” (Simmel 1978, p. 179).

Most of my interview partners who consider themselves as “other”, or as different to the perceived mainstream of Muslimness around them, would therefore seek another space—a trusted space—that is neither the private space of the family, nor the public space of larger society and politics, nor the digital space of social media. Instead, they look for a trusted space that mixes private with intimate interests. This consists of close friends, who either share the same (non-)religious conviction or who have other factors in common, such as making music, taking drugs, talking about, or rather joking about politics. Here, they could open up and act according to their own intimate positions or just be present without saying or doing anything that would reveal them as non-conformist, but without feeling uncomfortable in the environment (Rawlins [1992] 2017; Spencer and Ray 2006). They seek a peaceful environment that does not threaten their integrity and in which they

need not apply wrapping techniques on their selves. It is a bubble, a safe space, where not being Muslim is possible. No questions, no punishment, no rejections are to be expected in this bubble, and thus feelings of fear are not being evoked. All my interlocutors were relaxed and at ease in a chosen environment, whereas they stated that other environments, especially their family realms, are not as receptive of them in terms of their intimate selves. Accordingly, this feeling of doubt—being unable to be *doing* being Muslim—is not an emotion that they experience in the safe space. In other spaces, this feeling of doubt and failure is dominant and can lead to seclusion (Haddad 1997, pp. 3–29).

This seclusion is not only an intimate one in the sense of secluding one's emotions from others, but can also be a physical one in terms of not searching for the company of those who are perceived to be not understanding of the "new" belief status. While this active behaviour to determine the boundaries of one's spaces is described by almost all of my young interlocutors, they also describe their perspectives to be in opposition to mainstream perspectives on Islam and on being Muslim and on *doing* being Muslim. On the one hand, I understand this opposition as demarcation and segregation, especially in spatial terms. On the other hand, I also interpret it as resistance, in the sense of opposing how and what Islam should be for a larger public (Elyachar 2014, pp. 452–71; Abu-Lughod 1990, pp. 41–55; Scott 2008; Tohamy 2016; Daly 2010, pp. 59–85; Tadros 2016; Baizhi 2011, pp. 119–27. This resistance also opposes and criticises the social norms and expectations that accompany religious dominance (Baizhi 2011). In some cases, they might be willing to discuss these positions with their family and friends in order to justify themselves or to discuss boundaries of what could be possible and what is impossible, such as taking off the veil (see van Nieuwkerk and Kütük-Kuriş, this Special Issue).

However, in most cases, such debates are not taking place, especially not within the family, and only rarely with friends. It is much more common among my interlocutors to negotiate and re-negotiate their own belief with themselves. Interview partners who consider themselves Muslim may consult a sheikh, written sources or negotiate their relationship with God by themselves.

My interview partners who make their choices without the consultation of God cannot reassure themselves. So, sometimes they do things that they do not feel comfortable with, because society is not open for their ambivalent positions. They also consult their emotions and refer back to feeling "good" about their actions or decisions. It is important for them that despite someone no longer believing in God or Islam, it does not mean that they lack a moral conscience. Wes Morriston calls these non-believers, "reasonable non-believers" (Morriston 2009, pp. 1–10). My non-believing interlocutors consider themselves to be responsible human beings. This claim is important to them, because they grew up being told that non-Muslim societies are irresponsible, for example, regarding pre-marriage relationships or people's treatment of their elderly parents and perceived abandonment of them. They were usually introduced to God in their childhood as the guardian of morals, adequate behaviour, piety and as the one who declares what is good and bad.

Thus, without God, moral behaviour cannot endure. This criticism of non-belief is something many of my interviewees fear being confronted with, which is one of the reasons why they would never dare to discuss their non-belief openly with their families and friends. The doubt, ambiguity, "I don't know", "I am not sure" and indifference, underlie continuous changes that are not obvious to me as a researcher. Many of my non-believing interview partners oscillate, go through periods of non-belief—belief—non-belief and not being sure of what to believe, or how. It is a processual dynamic that depends on age, marital status or parenthood. I do not include gender here, because gender is not necessarily a factor that influences one's belief status, since women were equally among my research partners—however, for women, the situation changes more often in cases of marriage and motherhood.

8. Ambiguities and the God–Disciple Relationship: Feeling Alone

The above-mentioned processual dynamics do not happen without significant individual developments in terms of emotions and personality, especially in the realm of religiosity and non-religiosity. In my analysis of Qurʾān courses, I found that for those taking the course, the divine relationship in Islam is basically “between me and God”. This resembles an organic Islam freed from negative influence in order to become better Muslim by themselves, with others not being involved in this relationship (Franke 2020a). The same is true for the non-relation or un-relation if someone decides to be outside of the relationship with God. This too should just be between themselves and God or themselves and a deity or between themselves and nothing—depending on the respective viewpoint. In the context of deviant opinions, this exclusive relationship becomes even more relevant, because in most cases, it is impossible, due to state regulation and social stigma, for the non-believer to express their position openly. This feeling of being alone among family and friends, that is, not being able to express one’s doubts, alongside the feeling of being alone within Islam, is rather problematic and can lead to various corresponding behaviour. Dr. Shadi comments that psychological withdrawal, depression, violence, and abuse develop in relation to the feeling of being alone. Many of my interlocutors describe this feeling as abandonment, especially in the relationship with God. They literally feel abandoned by God, because they do not obey him. The feeling of “God hates me”, as stated by Saif, a young homosexual, is based on his opinion that his prayers are not divinely accepted, since homosexuality is forbidden in Islam (Long 2004, pp. 129–43; Tolino 2016, pp. 49–63). In the following account, his insecure position with regard to religion becomes apparent. He explicitly expresses his doubts and his worries:

“How come he loves me, if I am impossible for him? How would he listen to me, if I am not supposed to exist? If my entire being is wrong? This is so full of hypocrisy. I am all alone. I cannot talk to my family. I cannot talk to my friends. I cannot even talk to strangers [because they might reveal his identity to the police]. But I am here and I know so many gay people in Alexandria and still we do not exist. I want to leave this country. I want to be who I am in the streets and at home. I stopped praying because I can’t take this anymore. I also don’t fast. It’s useless. But at the same time, I do not have enough money to buy food outside. So during Ramadan, I eat stuff from the fridge that my mum cannot count, so she won’t notice. I am so embarrassed to have to do this. But my parents would never accept me the way I am. I doubt God. Why did he create me in the first place? In Egypt people think you can heal homosexuality, that it is something I chose. But it is not. Ever since I can remember I am like this. Not psychotherapy, no medication, nothing would change that. Yes, of course I can pretend to be straight. But I could not get married and have kids for example. Many here in Egypt do that as a cover up. But they are unhappy. I don’t want to end up like this. I want to go to Europe and be who I am. I don’t believe in Islam anymore. I feel alone and I cannot trust anyone”(interview with author, December 2017).

Saif’s self-perspective is mixed with ambivalent emotions towards his family, overall society and God. He feels that he has to neglect his intimate self and wrap himself in invisibility—not only in the private, supposedly safe space of the family, but even in the intimate space and relationship to God, and in the public space of Alexandria. For Saif, it feels as if he has to live in the shadows. Although he tries to adapt to society, it is basically impossible for him to be a fully accepted part of it. Despite his claims of not being religious, he has to abide by the oppressive structural norms that religion imposes on its followers, such as sexual limitations, living in one’s parents’ house, adhering to prayer and fasting. His outlook on the future looks rather grim, being raised in a family from a lower middle-class milieu. He is searching for alternative spaces and ideas, for a different lifestyle. What he finds instead is misogyny and homophobia mixed with racism and classism in the atmosphere of a military dictatorship in a city that is plastered with utopian ways of living and the offers of expensive real estate that portray a Western lifestyle to be the one

to which everyone aspires (Abaza 2020). Although he does not want to escape from this life and his home country, he does not see any other option beyond the traditional one of getting married, having children and having a job that will take up most of his time.

This frustration that Saif felt and expressed is something that many of my interview partners shared. He wishes for other options, but he fears that it is impossible in Egyptian society. Thus, he changes the little things that he can in his life—such as being the one who determines his (un-)relationship with God. The exclusive relationship that the believer shares with God in their intimate dialogues and prayers is something that many of my interlocutors stressed, in the sense of intimacy between oneself and God (Franke 2020a).

In general, when it comes to criticism of Islam in the personal realm and the relationship with God, my interview partners often said, that they “are ... and not ...”. They usually positioned themselves as opposed to something or someone else, or that something or someone else was opposed to them. Such as not practicing Islam “enough”, in the sense of not praying often enough would mean that they see themselves as being “far from God” which is opposed to being “close to God”. Others then, who pray more and more regularly, would be labelled from the outside as being “close to God”. In the accounts of my interview partners, dichotomies were dominantly expressed, that is, they regularly articulated opposites and judgements (perceived or expressed). Their language and oral expression contain a considerable number of juxtapositions and boundaries, which are inscribed with meaning. My non-believing interlocutors felt that anything described by others as pro-Islam and in favour of God to be something positive, valuable and good, whereas they experienced anything deciphered by others as contra-Islam and against God to be something negative, not valuable and bad. The interviews with non-conformists were often marked by defensive behaviour and expressions that would support or justify their deviant positions. It was striking that one is either “with God” or “not with God”. “With God” then is really anything that can still be labelled “Muslim” as opposed to those who claim to be atheists or agnostics or “non-Muslim” (anymore). The “in-between” is not necessarily accounted for: it can range from “Muslim, but not praying” to “Muslim, but drinking” to “Muslim and praying regularly”. It is as if there are only two options possible in Alexandria’s social discourse: Muslim and non-Muslim, although the latter is only accepted by those who belong to this very option, otherwise they are muted and mute themselves from their peers.

Silent, nuanced utterances are present, yet I found that they are mostly lost in the noise of the “Muslim” and “non-Muslim” debate. Defence and accusation, judgements and assessments are dominating the conversations I observed. It is striking that while biased behaviour and expressions are prohibited according to Islamic norms, they are still part of the discourse. Even in such cases where my interview partner stated that some people act or say things that are not in line with Islam, they would tend to have a dismissive tone: “this is what others do out there in the street “but this is not Islam” [*bas hūwa dah mish al-Islām*] (interview with author, November 2016). As Mo’men stated, for many of them, it is difficult to remain neutral and to embrace all the human mind-sets and options that are present in society. Another aspect flows into the debates of criticism of Islam that I listened to, namely that criticism can trigger self-reflection or actually should trigger self-reflection, something that is avoided by those who reject anything “other” to Islam.

9. Concluding Remarks

Despite the fact that the individual is at centre stage in my analysis, I observe a major development currently taking place in Egyptian society at large. First, many young Egyptians are experimenting not only with faith and religiosity, but also with testing social boundaries that are perceived to be applicable to every Muslim, such as not getting married, while at the same time having (a) relationship(s), not living in one’s parents’ house, undertaking body modifications, playing with fashion, and indulging and experimenting with sexuality. Second, those who are not testing these boundaries are experimenting with Islam and being religious on a different level—a level that is perceived to be a higher one

than the “normal” *doing* being religious. These people are striving for a better version of Islam (Frank 2020a). To sum up, those who still believe in God believe that they live in a society of double standards where “being committed and fearing God” does not exist anymore. This is why they consider themselves to be the “guardians” of Islam, the only ones left to protect and live their faith.

In this article, I have shown that my interlocutors do not necessarily understand criticism of Islam to equate to secularism or even apostasy. Rather, the notion of criticism of Islam contains many perspectives, among them also deviant perspectives. Most importantly, criticism here does not essentially refer to heresy and irreligion.

They experienced the revolution of 2011 and they are among those who are deliberately taking the path of individualisation. Their emotional spectrum is broad and diversely ranging from anger, failure, frustration and hopelessness. By means of the practice of everyday life, they contest mainstream Islam as lived by most Egyptians. They employ processes of individualisation to challenge the masses, and through emotions, change can also be evoked (Ajala 2018, pp. 57–71; El-Sharnouby 2017, pp. 84–95; Schielke 2009b, pp. 158–85; Deeb and Harb 2013, pp. 1–22). My interview partners might expect that the above-stated “negative” emotions that they felt leads to feelings of incapacitation (El Shakry 2017; Whitehead and Whitehead 2010).

However, my findings show that the opposite is the case. Hopefulness emerges, since something new can be created from the emotion of anger and from turning one’s back on Islam and thereby becoming open to other and different religious options (Whitehead and Whitehead 2010). Passivity is thus not the outcome, rather my interview partners are proactively meandering through the possibilities to act that remain or open up for them. Despite frustration, unemployment and a grim outlook for the future, they still want to change things and are motivated to act within the limitations they are surrounded by. Their love for Egypt in terms of its society is a strongly expressed sentiment. Within the larger social setting, they search for an environment in which they can live and meet their individual needs. Regardless of their opposing perspectives, they still want to be in line with, and in harmony with, the majority, especially with their family. Most of my interlocutors said that they wished for their parents and siblings to be open for their “new, different, other” selves and deviant perspectives on Islam, or at least to be open for a debate and ultimately for “letting be”. They demand an attitude of “live and let live”, something they grant everyone else, and they are now claiming for themselves.

Such an approach would allow the youth to experiment with trial and error and be an acknowledgement that change is asking for flexibility without pre-judgment. In addition, it would also discharge the elders and opponents from their responsibility given the “new” non-conformist convictions of the youth. According to my findings, the development of individual non-religiosities is something new in the recent history of Egyptian society. It is not only new, but contains a great deal of potential and energy that can culminate in changes that affect the larger society. Since I observe these changes to be processual and interlinked with individual dynamics, an outcome is unpredictable. However, the changes do not remain on the surface, but enter deeper structures in society, which is why I anticipate the youth’s energy to be pervasive.

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